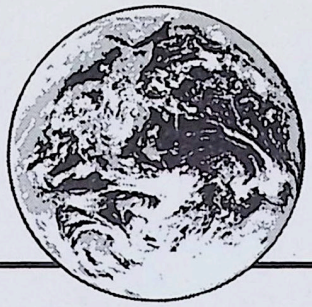
WHOLE EARTH Review
(415) 332-1716



ESSENTIAL WHOLE EARTH Catalog
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GENESIS

Stewart Brand began the Whole Earth Catalog in March 1968 to help friends who were starting their own alternative civilization in the backwoods. Most of these make-shift communes were full of enthusiasm and rife with ignorance. So many of the problems came down to a matter of access: Where to buy a windmill. Where to get good information on beekeeping. Where to lay hands on a computer. He fantasized an access service. A catalog that would name good stuff and where to get it. Continuously updated, in part by the users, it would be a low-maintenance, high-yield, Critical Information Service. Maybe it would include a card catalog sitting near a phone that one would flick through to find a tool, a publication, or a group to refer a caller to. Such service would cultivate pertinent self-education and life-long skills.

Taking the advice of Ken Kesey — to set his mind on a good product and let the money come to pass — Stewart employed word-of-mouth advertising and energetic amateurs to produce a newsprint tabloid catalog that quickly sold out its first printings. Despite an intentional hault in publication at its peak as an experiment to see what would happen, the Catalog sold over 2.5 million copies in various incarnations, eventually culminating in a gigantic, 5-1/2 pound wonder called the Next Whole Earth Catalog in 1981. It was too big to tote around, or read on the bus, so it was abbreviated into the Essential Whole Earth Catalog, entirely updated and released in October 1986. Nineteen years' worth of evaluating highly-evolved learning tools were distilled into the 416-page Essential Catalog. This experience and text forms the core of the Whole Earth Learning Disc Project.

The Whole Earth Learning Disc is close to what the Whole Earth Catalog would have been from the start if Hypercard was around: concise, to-the-point recommendations that lead to deepening levels and more examples as long as the reader is interested; a browsable format that rewards lateral exploration; tight indexing that rewards intensive searches; incremental updating to guarantee accuracy; and information that is wired to a live source, for securing the original product or author. Hypercard makes that kind of preformance, which is nearly impossible to do with ink, likely in the Learning Disc. It also bestows new powers to book publishing, a business that hasn't had a major evolution in 500 years. The original Catalog never talked much about recorded music because paper can't hold sound samples. Can't hold movie clips either. Now that Hypercard and CD-ROM spin off a dimension of interactive time, the Whole Earth Learning Disc is less like a reader's companion and more like a knowledgable advisor, as it had always been meant to be.